



Deconstruction: Theory and Practice

CHRISTOPHER NORRIS

METHUEN

London and New York

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General Editor's Preface

It is easy to see that we are living in a time of rapid and radical social change. It is much less easy to grasp the fact that such change will inevitably affect the nature of those academic disciplines that both reflect our society and help to shape it.

Yet this is nowhere more apparent than in the central field of what may, in general terms, be called literary studies. Here, among large numbers of students at all levels of education, the erosion of the assumptions and presuppositions that support the literary disciplines in their conventional form has proved fundamental. Modes and categories inherited from the past no longer seem to fit the reality experienced by a new generation.

New Accents is intended as a positive response to the initiative offered by such a situation. Each volume in the series will seek to encourage rather than resist the process of change, to stretch rather than reinforce the boundaries that currently define literature and its academic study.

Some important areas of interest immediately present themselves. In various parts of the world, new methods of analysis have been developed whose conclusions reveal the limitations of the Anglo-American outlook we inherit. New concepts of literary forms and modes have been proposed; new notions of the nature of literature itself and of how it communicates are current; new views of literature's role in relation to society

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flourish. *New Accents* will aim to expound and comment upon the most notable of these.

In the broad field of the study of human communication, more and more emphasis has been placed upon the nature and function of the new electronic media. *New Accents* will try to identify and discuss the challenge these offer to our traditional modes of critical response.

The same interest in communication suggests that the series should also concern itself with those wider anthropological and sociological areas of investigation which have begun to involve scrutiny of the nature of art itself and of its relation to our whole way of life. And this will ultimately require attention to be focused on some of those activities which in our society have hitherto been excluded from the prestigious realms of Culture. The disturbing realignment of values involved and the disconcerting nature of the pressures that work to bring it about both constitute areas that *New Accents* will seek to explore.

Finally, as its title suggests, one aspect of *New Accents* will be firmly located in contemporary approaches to language, and a continuing concern of the series will be to examine the extent to which relevant branches of linguistic studies can illuminate specific literary areas. The volumes with this particular interest will nevertheless presume no prior technical knowledge on the part of their readers, and will aim to rehearse the linguistics appropriate to the matter in hand, rather than to embark on general theoretical matters.

Each volume in the series will attempt an objective exposition of significant developments in its field up to the present as well as an account of its author's own views of the matter. Each will culminate in an informative bibliography as a guide to further study. And, while each will be primarily concerned with matters relevant to its own specific interests, we can hope that a kind of conversation will be heard to develop between them: one whose accents may perhaps suggest the distinctive discourse of the future.

TERENCE HAWKES

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Introduction

Literature as well as criticism – the difference between them being delusive – is condemned (or privileged) to be forever the most rigorous and, consequently, the most unreliable language in terms of which man names and transforms himself. (de Man 1979, p. 19)

This sentence by the critic Paul de Man is a fair sample of the kind of thinking about literature which is currently termed *deconstruction*. It bristles with the sort of paradox which that thinking finds at work not only in literary texts but in criticism, philosophy and all varieties of discourse, its own included. What can it mean to reject the distinction between literature and criticism as merely a delusion? How can a language be at once the most 'rigorous' and the most 'unreliable' source of knowledge? In what conceivable sense can man 'transform' himself through a process of naming somehow made possible by this rigorous unreliability? These are not problems that either resolve themselves on a more careful reading or simply settle down (like religious belief) into a system of self-supporting paradox. Rather they operate, as more than one disgruntled critic has remarked of de Man, as a positive technique for making trouble; an affront to every normal and comfortable habit of thought.

Deconstruction is a constant reminder of the etymological

link between 'crisis' and 'criticism'. It makes manifest the fact that any radical shift of interpretative thought must always come up against the limits of seeming absurdity. Philosophers have long had to recognize that thinking may lead them inescapably into regions of scepticism such that life could scarcely carry on if people were to act on their conclusions. David Hume (1711–76) called scepticism 'a malady which can never be radically cured, but must return upon us every moment, however we may chase it away. . . . Carelessness and inattention alone can afford us any remedy' (quoted in Russell 1954, p. 697). Deconstruction works at the same giddy limit, suspending all that we take for granted about language, experience and the 'normal' possibilities of human communication. Yet this is not to say that it is a freakish or marginal philosophy, the perverse sport of super-subtle minds disenchanted with the workaday business of literary criticism. Hume saw no way out of his sceptical predicament, except by soothing the mind with careless distractions (billiards was apparently the usual solace of his afternoons). Deconstruction is likewise an activity of thought which cannot be consistently acted on – that way madness lies – but which yet possesses an inescapable rigour of its own.

De Man complains that deconstruction has either been 'dismissed as a harmless academic game' or 'denounced as a terrorist weapon'. Both reactions are understandable, though both – as this book will argue – are equally wide of the mark. Deconstruction is the active antithesis of everything that criticism ought to be if one accepts its traditional values and concepts. Beneath all the age-old conflicts of critical method there has always existed a tacit agreement about certain conventions, or rules of debate, without which (supposedly) no serious thinking about literature could be carried on. That literary texts possessed meaning and that literary criticism sought a knowledge of that meaning – a knowledge with its own proper claims to validity – were principles implicit across the widest divergences of thought. But deconstruction challenges the fundamental distinction between 'literature' and 'criticism' implied by those principles. And it also challenges the idea that criticism provides a special kind of knowledge precisely in so far as its texts don't aspire to 'literary' status. For the deconstructionist, criticism (like philosophy) is always an activity of

writing, and nowhere more rigorous – to paraphrase de Man – than where it knows and allows for its own 'literary' vagaries.

This is to anticipate whole tracts of argument which will need rehearsing in detail if the reader is to be convinced. Meanwhile I take ambiguous comfort from Derrida's remarks (in *Of Grammatology*) on the strange and deceptive status of 'prefaces' in general. For one thing they are usually – as here! – written last of all and placed up front as a gesture of authorial command. They claim a summarizing function, a power of abstracted systematic statement, which denies the very process and activity of thought involved in the project of writing. Yet they also subvert, in deconstructive fashion, that authority of 'the text' which traditionally attaches to the work itself. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak puts it, in her own Translator's Preface to the English version of *Grammatology*:

the structure preface – text becomes open at both ends. The text has no stable identity, stable origin . . . each act of reading 'the text' is a preface to the next. The reading of a self-professed preface is no exception to this rule. (Derrida 1977a, p. xii)

In this sense what follows is also a 'preface', a deferred involvement with the writings of Derrida, and not to be taken on trust as a handy and 'objective' survey of deconstructionist method. If there is one applied lesson to be taken away, it is the powerlessness of ready-made concepts to explain or delimit the activity of writing.

I

Roots: structuralism and New Criticism

To present 'deconstruction' as if it were a method, a system or a settled body of ideas would be to falsify its nature and lay oneself open to charges of reductive misunderstanding. Critical theory is nowadays a reputable academic business with a strong vested interest in absorbing and coming to terms with whatever new challenges the times may produce. Structuralism, it is now plain to see, was subject from the outset to a process of adaptation by British and American critics who quickly took heart from what they saw as its 'practical' or 'commonsense' uses. What started as a powerful protest against ruling critical assumptions ended up as just one more available method for saying new things about well-worn texts. By now there is probably a structuralist reading, in one guise or another, of just about every classic of English literature. A few minutes' search through the index of any learned journal is enough to show how structuralism has taken hold in the most respectable and cherished quarters of academic study. Old polemics are quietly forgotten because the ground has meanwhile shifted to such an extent that erstwhile opponents find themselves now in a state of peaceful alliance. To trace this history in detail would provide an instructive example of the capacity of Anglo-American academic criticism to absorb and homogenize any new theory that threatens its sovereign claim.

Deconstruction can be seen in part as a vigilant reaction

against this tendency in structuralist thought to tame and domesticate its own best insights. Some of Jacques Derrida's most powerful essays are devoted to the task of dismantling a concept of 'structure' that serves to immobilize the play of meaning in a text and reduce it to a manageable compass. This process can be seen at work in the reception of a book like Jonathan Culler's *Structuralist Poetics* (1975), regarded (not without reason) as a sound and authoritative guide to the complexities of structuralist thought. Culler's volume has been widely prescribed as student reading by critics and teachers who otherwise show small sympathy with current theoretical developments. Its appeal, one may fairly conjecture, lies partly in its commonsense dealing with problems of interpretative method, and partly in its principled rejection of other, more extreme kinds of theory which would question any such method. Culler makes no secret of his aim to reconcile structuralist theory with a naturalized or intuitive approach to texts. The proper task of theory, in his view, is to provide a legitimating framework or system for insights which a 'competent' reader should be able to arrive at and check against his sense of relevance and fitness. Culler's main claim for the structuralist approach is that it offers a kind of regulative matrix for perceptions that might otherwise seem merely dependent on the critic's personal flair or virtuosity.

His argument becomes strained when it tries to link this notion of readerly 'competence' with an account of the manifold conventions – or arbitrary codes – that make up a literate response. On the one hand Culler appeals to what seems a loose extension of the linguist Noam Chomsky's argument: that linguistic structures are innately programmed in the human mind and operate both as a constraint upon language and as a means of shared understanding. Thus Culler puts the case that our comprehension of literary texts is conditioned by a similar 'grammar' of response which enables us to pick out the relevant structures of meaning from an otherwise inchoate mass of competing detail. On the other hand, he is obliged to recognize that literary texts, unlike the sentences of everyday language, involve certain specialized codes of understanding which have to be acquired and cannot be accounted for in terms of some universal grammar of response. Competence in these terms is a

matter of trained intelligence, of justifying one's reading of a text 'by locating it within the conventions of plausibility defined by a generalized knowledge of literature' (Culler 1975, p. 127).

This is structuralism at its most conservative, an outlook that lends support to traditional ideas of the text as a bearer of stable (if complicated) meanings and the critic as a faithful seeker after truth in the text. Culler is evasive about whether these interpretative structures are unchangeably vested in the human mind or whether – as seems more likely – they represent the force of established convention, a kind of second nature to the practised reader. Whatever their status, they clearly imply some manner of check or effective restraint upon the freedoms of critical discourse: hence Culler's doubts (in the final chapter of *Structuralist Poetics*) about the radical claims of those, like Derrida, who seem bent upon dismantling the very bases of interpretative method and meaning.

Deconstruction is avowedly 'post-structuralist' in its refusal to accept the idea of structure as in any sense given or objectively 'there' in a text. Above all, it questions the assumption – so crucial to Culler – that structures of meaning correspond to some deep-laid mental 'set' or pattern of mind which determines the limits of intelligibility. Theory, from Culler's point of view, would be a search for invariant structures or formal universals which reflect the very nature of human intelligence. Literary texts (along with myths, music and other cultural artefacts) yield up their meaning to a mode of analysis possessed of a firm rationale because its sights are set on nothing less than a total explanation of human thought and culture. Theory is assured of its methodological bearings by claiming a deep, universal kinship with the systems of meaning that it proposes to analyse.

Deconstruction, on the contrary, starts out by rigorously *suspending* this assumed correspondence between mind, meaning and the concept of method which claims to unite them.

From Kant to Saussure: the prison-house of concepts

'Kantianism without the transcendental subject' is a description often applied to structuralist thought by those who doubt its validity. Culler's line of argument demonstrates the force of

this slogan, showing itself very much akin to the Kantian philosophy of mind and reason. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) set out to redeem philosophy from the radical scepticism of those, like Hume, who thought it impossible to arrive at any definite, self-validating knowledge of the external world. They had tried and conspicuously failed to discover any necessary link between the laws of thought (or deductive logic) and the nature of real-life events and experience. Thought seemed condemned to a prison-house of reason, endlessly rehearsing its own suppositions but unable to connect them with the world at large. Sensory evidence was no more reliable than ideas like that of cause-and-effect, the 'logic' of which merely reflected or complied with the processes of thought.

Kant saw an escape-route from this condition of deadlocked sceptical reason. It was, he agreed, impossible for consciousness to grasp or 'know' the world in the direct, unmediated form despaired of by Hume and the sceptics. Knowledge was a product of the human mind, the operations of which could only *interpret* the world, and not deliver it up in all its pristine reality. But these very operations, according to Kant, were so deeply vested in human understanding that they offered a new foundation for philosophy. Henceforth philosophy must concern itself not with a delusory quest for 'the real' but with precisely those deep regularities – or *a priori* truths – that constitute human understanding.

It is not hard to see the parallels between Kantian thought and the structuralist outlook presented by a theorist like Culler. Both have their origins in a sceptical divorce between mind and the 'reality' it seeks to understand. In structuralist terms this divorce was most clearly spelled out by the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. He argued that our knowledge of the world is inextricably shaped and conditioned by the language that serves to represent it. Saussure's insistence on the 'arbitrary' nature of the sign led to his undoing of the natural link that common sense assumes to exist between word and thing. Meanings are bound up, according to Saussure, in a system of relationship and difference that effectively determines our habits of thought and perception. Far from providing a 'window' on reality or (to vary the metaphor) a faithfully reflecting mirror, language brings along with it a whole intricate network

of established significations. In his view, our knowledge of things is insensibly structured by the systems of code and convention which alone enable us to classify and organize the chaotic flow of experience. There is simply no access to knowledge except by way of language and other, related orders of representation. Reality is carved up in various ways according to the manifold patterns of sameness and difference which various languages provide. This basic *relativity* of thought and meaning (a theme later taken up by the American linguists Sapir and Whorf) is the starting-point of structuralist theory.

There are, however, various ways of responding to this inaugural insight. Culler exemplifies the Kantian response which strives to keep scepticism at bay by insisting on the normative or somehow self-validating habits of readerly 'competence'. Culler is in search of a generalized theory (or 'poetics') of reading which would fully encompass all the various means we possess for making sense of literary texts. Relativism is thus held in check by an appeal to the reader as a kind of moderating presence, a mind in possession of the requisite intelligence and the relevant codes of literate convention. One must, Culler argues, 'have a sense, however undefined, of what one is reading towards' (Culler 1975, p. 163). Interpretation is a quest for order and intelligibility among the manifold possible patterns of sense which the text holds out to a fit reader. The role of a structuralist poetics is partly to explain how these powerful conventions come into play, and partly to draw a line between mere ingenuity and the proper, legitimate or 'competent' varieties of readerly response.

What Culler is proposing in the name of structuralism is a more methodical approach to the kind of criticism that has long been accepted as a staple of academic teaching. The virtue of his theory, from this point of view, is the ease with which it incorporates all manner of examples from other 'pre-structuralist' critics who happen to illustrate the conventions Culler has in mind. There is room within his generalized notion of literary 'competence' for various insights which had often been arrived at without the benefit of any such systematic theory. This follows logically enough from the analogy he draws with Chomskian linguistics. To demonstrate the complex system of rules and transformations underlying a speaker's

grammatical utterance is not, of course, to claim any *conscious* knowledge of that system on the speaker's part. Linguistic 'competence', as Chomsky calls it, is tacit and wholly unconscious except when brought to light by the linguist's peculiar and specialized activity. The 'transcendental subject' (or seat of intelligence) in Kantian philosophy is likewise capable of exercising its *a priori* powers without being made in the least aware of them.

Culler adopts the same attitude to critics whose intuitive approach is undeniably fruitful but lacks any larger, organizing theory of valid response. Typical is his treatment of a passage from William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, selected for what Culler sees as its all-but-conscious structuralist implications. The 'poem' in question (see Empson 1961, p. 23) is Arthur Waley's translation of a two-line fragment from the Chinese:

Swiftly the years, beyond recall.
Solemn the stillness of this spring morning.

Culler remarks how Empson's reading brings out the 'binary oppositions' (mainly the contrast of time-scales) which give the lines their effect. This lends support to Culler's argument that, 'in interpreting a poem, one looks for terms that can be placed on a semantic or thematic axis and opposed to one another' (Culler 1975, p. 126). Such strategies arise from the reader's desire to maximize the interest or significance of a text by discovering its manifold patterns of meaning. A 'competent' reading is one that displays both the acumen required to perceive such meanings and the good sense needed to sort them out from other, less relevant patterns. For his notion of 'relevance' Culler appeals once again to a trans-individual community of judgement assumed to underlie the workings of literate response. Structuralism, with its emphasis on distinctive features and significant contrasts, becomes in effect a *natural extension* or legitimating theory of what it is properly to read a text.

Culler has no real quarrel with those among the 'old' New Critics who talked in terms of irony, paradox or (like Empson) types of ambiguity. These and other patterns of response he regards as enabling conventions, produced by the will to make

sense of texts in a complex and satisfying way. Culler's relatively modest proposal is that critics continue to read in much the same manner but also reflect on the structures that supposedly govern their various rhetorical notions.

Thus Empson's 'ambiguity' is found to rest on a principle of binary opposition, the presence of which, in structuralist terms, does more to explain its suggestive power. Such structures may not be objectively 'there' in the text but they offer (it is assumed) so basic and powerful a convention of reading as to place their validity beyond serious doubt. Culler's poetics, therefore, involves a double *a priori* or regulative claim to knowledge. On the one hand it presupposes an activity of reading grounded in certain deeply naturalized codes of understanding. On the other, it assumes that texts must offer at least sufficient hold – in the way of contrastive or structural features – for such an activity to take its own intuitive bearings.

New Critic into structuralist?

Culler's implicit equation between 'structure' and 'competence' is precisely the kind of interpretative ploy that deconstruction sets out to challenge. The concept of structure is all too easily allowed to dominate thought and take on a self-sustaining objectivity immune to critical reflection. It is on these terms that structuralism has proved itself a not-too-threatening presence on the academic scene. Least of all does it now seem a menace – as traditionalist critics once argued – through its 'scientific' rigour and taste for abstraction. American New Criticism in its day attracted the same hostility from those who regarded its rhetorical bases – 'irony', 'paradox', 'tension' – as so many bits of monstrous abstract machinery. Yet it soon became clear that, so far from wanting to rationalize poetry or reduce it to logical order, the New Critics were bent upon preserving its uniqueness by fencing it off within the bounds of their chosen rhetoric. The poem as 'verbal icon', in William K. Wimsatt's phrase, became the rallying-point of a criticism devoted to the privileged autonomy of poetic language.

If system and structure were prominent in the New Critics' thinking, the aim was not so much to provide a rationale of poetic meaning – a logic of logical anomalies – but rather to

build a criticism capable of warding off such rationalist assaults. New Critical method was rational enough in its mode of argumentation but kept a firm distance between its own methodology and the differently organized workings of poetic language. This distance was emphatically preserved by the rules of interpretative conduct which Wimsatt, philosopher-elect of the movement, raised to a high point of principle (see Wimsatt 1954). Chief among these was their attack on the 'heresy of paraphrase', the idea that poetic meaning could be translated into any kind of rational prose equivalent. The poem, in short, was a sacrosanct object whose autonomy demanded a proper respect for the difference between *it* and the language that critics used to describe it.

The New Critics' programme soon took hold as an eminently teachable discipline of literary study. Its erstwhile detractors were easily reconciled to a creed that scarcely challenged the proprieties of critical reason. The same is true of structuralism in its early, scientific guise. Culler's arguments demonstrate the ease with which a structuralist gloss can be placed upon strategies of reading basically akin to those of the 'old' New Criticism. Academic discourse has little to fear from a 'scientific' criticism – however sweeping its claims – which holds out the promise of a highly self-disciplined knowledge of the text. Such a specialized activity can be allowed to take its place as one among many alternative methods, relied upon to beat its own disciplinary bounds.

Roland Barthes

Culler's poetics of reading is therefore in accord with one powerful strain of structuralist thought. In the early writing of Barthes, among others, the aim was a full-scale science of the text modelled on the linguistics of Saussure and the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss. These ambitions were signalled by the widespread structuralist talk of criticism as a 'metalanguage' set up to articulate the codes and conventions of all (existing or possible) literary texts – hence the various efforts to establish a universal 'grammar' of narrative, along with a typology of literary genres based on their predominating figures

of language. This view of structuralism as a kind of master-code or analytic discourse upon language is taken by Barthes in his *Elements of Semiology* (1967). Natural language, including the dimension of 'connotative' meaning, is subject to a metalinguistic description which operates in scientific terms and provides a separate or 'second-order' level of understanding. It is evident, according to Barthes, that semiology must be such a meta-language, 'since as a second-order system it takes over a first language (or language-object) which is the system under scrutiny; and this system-object is *signified* through the meta-language of semiology' (Barthes 1967, p. 92). This tortuous explanation really comes down to the belief in structuralist method as a discourse able to master and explain all the varieties of language and culture.

At least this is one way of construing Barthes's text, a reading that brings it into line with accepted ideas of the structuralist activity. There are, however, signs that Barthes was not himself content with so rigid and reductive a programme. If semiology sets up as a second-order discourse unravelling the connotative systems of natural language, why should it then be immune to further operations at a yet higher level of analysis? 'Nothing in principle prevents a meta-language from becoming in its turn the language-object of a new meta-language; this would, for example, be the case with semiology if it were to be "spoken" by another science' (ibid., p. 93).

Barthes is well aware of the dangers and delusions implicit in a discourse that claims the last word in explanatory power. The semiologist may seem to exercise 'the objective function of decipherer' in relation to a world which 'conceals or naturalizes' the meanings of its own dominant culture. But his apparent objectivity is made possible only by a habit of thought which willingly forgets or suppresses its own provisional status. To halt such a process by invoking some ultimate claim to truth is a tactic foreign to the deepest implications of structuralist thought. There is no final analysis, no metalinguistic method, which could possibly draw a rigorous line between its own operations and the language they work upon. Semiology has to recognize that the terms and concepts it employs are always bound up with the signifying process it sets out to analyse. Hence Barthes's insistence that structuralism is always an

activity, an open-ended practice of reading, rather than a 'method' convinced of its own right reason.

Barthes was alive from the outset to the problems and paradoxes involved in refining structuralist theory without introducing such premature hints of method. To enlist him on the side of deconstruction is perhaps misleading in view of his elusiveness from any theoretical standpoint. Barthes was a brilliant stylist and a highly original – at times even wayward – constructor of theories. His writing was self-conscious to the point where style became an intimate probing of its own possibilities, frequently suggesting theoretical insights but just as often foreclosing them through a sense of resistance to any kind of organized theory. His later texts maintain a dialogue not only with structuralism but with Derrida, Jacques Lacan and other post-structuralist thinkers whose influence Barthes both acknowledges and keeps at a certain protective distance. He remains susceptible as ever to the pleasures of system and method, the old fascination with structure as a totalizing order of thought. But he now seems to view such ideas as 'fantasmatic' images projected by desire upon the polymorphous surface of text, language and culture. The dream of total intelligibility, like 'structure' in its metalinguistic sense, belongs (he implies) to a stage of thinking that is self-blinded by its own conceptual metaphors. The element of rhetorical *play* is present everywhere. Its effects in critical discourse may be ignored, but they are not effaced by the structuralist 'science' of meaning.

This ambivalent attitude to language and structure is one of the themes Barthes takes up in his fragmentary 'autobiography', translated into English in 1977. It might seem an act of supreme 'bad faith' to produce such a work while proclaiming, like Barthes, the 'death of the author' as a wished-for escape from the tyranny of subjectivity. But the reader is soon made aware that Barthes is not to be caught – by anyone except himself – with his textual defences down. He is, as always, shrewdly beforehand with the *hypocrite lecteur* who thinks to ensnare him with simplified versions of his own way of thinking. There is a consummately neat example in Barthes's recollection of an American student ('or positivist, or disputacious: I cannot disentangle') who took it for granted that 'subjectivity' and 'narcissism' were the same thing: 'a matter of speaking well

about oneself'. The student was a victim, Barthes reflects,

of the old couple, the old paradigm: *subjectivity/objectivity*. Yet today the subject apprehends himself elsewhere, and subjectivity can return at another place on the spiral: deconstructed, taken apart, shifted, without anchorage: why should I not speak of 'myself' since this 'my' is no longer 'the self'? (Barthes 1977, p. 168)

What Barthes in fact offers, by way of autobiography, is a sequence of deftly turned reflections on the experience of writing, the duplicities of language and the irreducibly *textual* nature of whatever they communicate. As one such playful alibi (or 'shifter' as Barthes would call it, borrowing the term from Roman Jakobson), he writes always in the narrative third person, addressing the various topics of his own obsessive interest with a kind of quizzical detachment. As the book's epigraph helpfully suggests, 'it should all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel'.

Barthes undermines not only the natural conventions of language but also those methods (his own included) that claim to have mastered their working. The early, 'structuralist' Barthes is called to account by this later *alter ego* for his pursuit of system and method, a deluded quest but still a source of considerable pleasure. The dialogue-of-one becomes a kind of mocking catechism:

You keep the notion of 'meta-language', but in the category of image-reservoir. This is a constant procedure in your work: you use a pseudo-linguistics, a metaphorical linguistics . . . these concepts come to constitute allegories, a second language, whose abstraction is diverted to fictive ends. . . . And meaning itself – when you watch it functioning, you do so with the almost puerile amusement of a buyer who never tires of pulling the switch of some gadget. (ibid., p. 124)

This perfectly catches the movement of thought by which Barthes manages to 'discompose' his own ideas and restore them to a textual dimension evoking all the suppleness and vagaries of pure linguistic play.

This aspect of Barthes marks the point at which deconstruction begins to shake and unsettle the structuralist project. It has

been quietly passed over by critics anxious to domesticate structuralism by presenting it as a 'method' sometimes outlandish in its claims but basically amenable to commonsense uses. The apparent eccentricities of Barthes's later writing are mostly regarded as harmless whimsical diversions on the part of a critic who required some form of 'creative' escape from the exigencies of high-powered theory. This attitude, typical of Anglo-American criticism, draws a firm line between the discipline of *thinking* about texts and the activity of writing which that discipline is supposed to renounce or ignore in its own performance. Criticism as 'answerable style' (in Geoffrey Hartman's phrase) is an idea that cuts right across the deep-grained assumptions of academic discourse. It is, as I shall argue, one of the most unsettling and radical departures of deconstructionist thought. A properly attentive reading of Barthes brings out the extent to which critical concepts are ceaselessly transformed or undone by the activity of self-conscious writing.

This vertiginous textual movement is resisted by readers who see no connection between the 'structuralist' Barthes and the wayward, dandified discourse of his later writings. Such a reader is Philip Thody, whose book on Barthes (subtitled *A Conservative Estimate*) presents him as a gifted but erratic thinker, full of good ideas but apt to go off at an embarrassing tangent (Thody 1977). Thody is convinced that beneath all the fireworks there is a structure of assumptions not so very different from those of the old New Criticism. Barthes is on the one hand a dazzling performer, a master of verbal subterfuge, and, on the other, a decently methodical thinker dressed up in the current Parisian style. His subversive tactics come down to an inordinate fondness for paradox disguising a commitment to order and method.

Thody's recuperative reading is plainly intended to make sense of Barthes for conservative-minded British consumers. His bluff commonsensical tone combines with the attitude that neatly drives a wedge between the acceptable face of structuralist *method* and its other, more radical implications. Hence his slight impatience with Barthes's paradoxical strain, a tendency Thody regards as peripheral and probably betraying some strong but repressed 'creative' drive. That paradox might be at the root of Barthes's thinking, rather than merely an ornament

of 'style', is a notion scarcely to be entertained. Yet this is precisely the import of numerous passages in his writing which show Barthes consciously confronting reason and method with twists of argument beyond their power of absorption. One of the fragments from his pseudo-autobiography makes this 'reactive formation' the source and motive of all Barthes's writing.

A *doxa* (a popular opinion) is formulated, intolerable; to free myself of it, I postulate a paradox; then this paradox turns bad, becomes a new concretion, itself becomes a new *doxa*, and I must seek further for a new paradox. (Barthes 1977, p. 71)

Thody's attitude reflects a belief that paradox and suchlike figures of thought belong to the province of 'literary' language and can play only a marginal or self-indulgent role in criticism. It is the same demarcation that the New Critics set between the figural devices of poetry and the rational language of prose explication.

This boundary was always subject to periodic raids and incursions by the more adventurous New Critics, especially those poets and novelists among them who felt uneasy with a discipline that placed one aspect of their writing at such a remove from the other. The issue was more than a matter of critical technique. What the orthodox New Critics sought in the language of poetry was a structure somehow transcending human reason and ultimately pointing to a religious sense of values. Walter Ong makes the point most effectively in his essay 'Wit and Mystery'. There is a direct relation, he argues, between the New Critics' emphasis on poetic 'wit' (with its correlative figures of irony, paradox, etc.) and their general allegiance to Christian belief: 'At the point to which the trail of wit leads, the very texture of poetry itself . . . is seen to come into fundamental contact with the heart of Christian doctrine' (Ong 1962, p. 90). R. P. Blackmur reaches a similar conclusion in discussing the role of poetic 'analogy', the way in which poems can suggest without stating the conflicts and tensions of existence: 'Only in analogy are the opposites identical . . . and it was a similar perception which led Saint Augustine to say that in every poem there is some of the substance of God' (Blackmur 1967, pp. 42-3). It thus becomes a matter of deep doctrinal

commitment that criticism should respect the peculiar sanctions of poetic language and restrict its own operations to the separate realm of rational prose statement. To confuse the two is to break down the disciplined awareness which strives to preserve the authentic 'mystery' of poetic truth.

Thus the autonomy of poetry became not merely an issue in aesthetics but a testing-point of faith in relation to human reason. Behind the New Critical rhetoric of irony and paradox is a whole metaphysics of language, where poetic and religious claims to truth are bound up together. At the same time there were those who assented in principle to this discipline of thought but found it in practice hard, if not impossible, to live with. Allen Tate, for instance, adhered to the basic New Critical belief that poetic 'tension' and 'paradox' were the hallmarks of a knowledge superior to reason and linked to the ineffable certitudes of faith. Yet he also wrote of the 'intolerable' strain imposed upon the critical mind by the very nature of its 'middle position between imagination and philosophy' (Tate 1953, p. 111). Tate, like Blackmur in his speculative moments, seems to be struggling with the protocols of New Critical belief and venturing – albeit very warily – on to different ground. Take the following passage from Blackmur's *A Primer of Ignorance*:

Just as the imagination is never able to get all of itself into the arbitrary forms of art and has to depend on aids from the intellect, from conventions . . . so the intellect in dealing with imagination is itself imperfect and has to depend upon conventions of its own, some quite formalistic. (Blackmur 1967, pp. 77–8)

Blackmur and Tate are both uneasily aware that the languages of literature and criticism by no means obey the rigid territorial imperative laid down by orthodox fiat.

Beyond New Criticism

The challenge became stronger when critics like Geoffrey Hartman announced their intention of breaking altogether with New Critical method and moving 'beyond formalism'. That the stakes were more than aesthetically loaded is clear from the response of rearguard New Critics, including W. K. Wimsatt,

whose essay 'Battering the Object' (1970) sought to recall American criticism to its proper methods and ends. Wimsatt was defensively reacting to a new school of thought which questioned the privileged autonomy of poetic form and claimed a much greater degree of speculative freedom for the literary critic. The sources of this thought were in continental theory, and its American representatives – among them Paul de Man and J. Hillis Miller – were later to become the protagonists of deconstruction.

It is possible, then, to make out a parallel shift of awareness affecting both the structuralist activity and the deep-laid foundations of American New Criticism. It would, of course, be wrong to push this parallel too far. Structuralist theory never took on the kind of quasi-religious orthodoxy invoked by New Critical method. But it was, as I have tried to show, subject to various domesticating pressures which effectively scaled off its more disturbing implications. Culler's appeal to the moderating judgement of the 'competent' reader is one such response, attempting to ground critical theory in an all-but-transcendental philosophy of mind. Thody's treatment of Barthes is a cruder but no less determined effort to isolate what is useful and methodical and consign the rest to a harmless realm of stylistic indulgence. New Criticism and structuralism each had its orthodox side, an aspect that lent itself to wholly conformable uses. At the same time they both tended to generate, in livelier minds, a sense of unease or frustration which called their very methods into question.

For American critics the waning of New Critical hegemony coincided with a sudden new interest in French theoretical ideas. This came at a time when structuralism was already being subjected (in the texts of Derrida especially) to a searching critique of its own suppositions and methodical claims. The effect of this convergence is manifest in the writings of Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller and others whose passage 'beyond formalism' led them, through various stages, to what is now a deconstructionist position. In 1970 Hartman was still finding it difficult to imagine where this speculative quest might lead to. 'To go beyond formalism', he wrote (1970, p. 113), 'is as yet too hard for us and may even be, unless we are Hegelians believing in absolute spirit, against the nature of understanding.' His

state of perplexity recalls the problems faced by Blackmur and Tate in their speculative musings. The difference lies partly in Hartman's rejection of any absolute doctrinal adherence, and partly in the much wider range of ideas created by structuralist debate.

These new-found freedoms are very much at work in Hartman's essay on Milton, which exuberantly breaks with New Critical assumptions about language, style and the place of critical theory (see 'Adam on the Grass with Balsamum', in Hartman 1970). That Milton should be chosen as fighting ground is further indication of the challenge being offered to New Critical opinion. The New Critics mostly followed Eliot in using the 'problem' of Milton's style as a cover for their deep dislike of his radicalism in politics and religion. Hartman sets out to overturn this powerful consensus. He defends not only Milton's style but the critic's freedom to adopt a charged and 'answerable' style of his own in order to counter the weight of received opinion. Hartman wants to initiate 'a more adventurous hermeneutic tradition, even at the risk of deepening, provisionally, the difference between criticism and interpretation'. By 'criticism' Hartman means that disciplined and self-denying ordinance of method which keeps a safe distance between the literary text and the discourse that seeks to comprehend it. The 'hermeneutic' tradition, on the other hand, takes account of the interpreter's puzzles and perplexities by *including* them within the terms of a full and generous response. Such a style is 'answerable' in its sense of the constant provisional adjustments the critic has to make between theory and text. It thus works to forestall any cramping or excessively rigid method.

Hartman, like Barthes, asserts the critic's freedom to exploit a style that actively transforms and questions the nature of interpretative thought. In itself this marks a decisive break with the scrupulous decorum of critical language maintained in Eliot's wake. Eliot famously defined the 'perfect critic' as one who showed 'intelligence itself swiftly operating the analysis of sensation to the point of principle and definition'. This is to argue that theory, in so far as it is valid at all, is strictly a matter of placing some orderly construction upon the 'immediate' data of perception. Barthes and Hartman totally reject this careful policing of the bounds between literature and theory. Where

Eliot proposes a disciplined or educating movement of thought from perception to principle, they discover an endlessly fascinating conflict, the 'scene' of which is the text itself in its alternating aspects of knowledge and pleasurable fantasy.

This is deconstruction in one of its modes: a deliberate attempt to turn the resources of interpretative style against any too rigid convention of method or language. It emerged, as we have seen, through the impingement of post-structuralist thought on an American New Critical tradition already showing symptoms of internal strain and self-doubt. But deconstruction has another, more toughly argumentative aspect which starts out from similar questioning motives but pursues them to a different end. Its readings, though suspicious of method and system, are themselves rigorously argued and as remote from Hartman's virtuoso language as Hartman is from the academic style he seeks to explode. Jacques Derrida is the philosophic source of this powerful critique, and Paul de Man at present its foremost American exponent.

In the hands of less subtle and resourceful readers deconstruction can become – it is all too clear – a theoretical vogue as uniform and cramping as the worst New Critical dogma. At best it has provided the impetus for a total revaluation of interpretative theory and practice, the effects of which have yet to be fully absorbed.

2

Jacques Derrida:
language against itself

The texts of Jacques Derrida defy classification according to any of the clear-cut boundaries that define modern academic discourse. They belong to 'philosophy' in so far as they raise certain familiar questions about thought, language, identity and other longstanding themes of philosophical debate. Moreover, they raise those questions through a form of critical dialogue with previous texts, many of which (from Plato to Husserl and Heidegger) are normally assigned to the history of philosophic thought. Derrida's professional training was as a student of philosophy (at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, where he now teaches), and his writings demand of the reader a considerable knowledge of the subject. Yet Derrida's texts are like nothing else in modern philosophy, and indeed represent a challenge to the whole tradition and self-understanding of that discipline.

One way of describing this challenge is to say that Derrida refuses to grant philosophy the kind of privileged status it has always claimed as the sovereign dispenser of reason. Derrida confronts this claim to power on its own chosen ground. He argues that philosophers have been able to impose their various systems of thought only by ignoring, or suppressing, the disruptive effects of language. His aim is always to draw out these effects by a critical reading which fastens on, and skilfully unpicks, the elements of metaphor and other figurative devices.

at work in the texts of philosophy. Deconstruction in this, its most rigorous form acts as a constant reminder of the ways in which language deflects or complicates the philosopher's project. Above all, deconstruction works to undo the idea – according to Derrida, the ruling illusion of Western metaphysics – that reason can somehow dispense with language and arrive at a pure, self-authenticating truth or method. Though philosophy strives to efface its textual or 'written' character, the signs of that struggle are there to be read in its blind-spots of metaphor and other rhetorical strategies.

In this sense Derrida's writings seem more akin to literary criticism than philosophy. They rest on the assumption that modes of rhetorical analysis, hitherto applied mainly to literary texts, are in fact indispensable for reading *any* kind of discourse, philosophy included. Literature is no longer seen as a kind of poor relation to philosophy contenting itself with mere 'imaginary' themes and forgoing any claim to philosophic dignity and truth. This attitude has, of course, a long prehistory in Western tradition. It was Plato who expelled the poets from his ideal republic, who set up reason as a guard against the false beguilements of rhetoric, and who called forth a series of critical 'defences' and 'apologies' which runs right through from Sir Philip Sidney to I. A. Richards and the American New Critics. The lines of defence have been variously drawn up, according to whether the critic sees himself as *contesting* philosophy on its own argumentative ground, or as operating outside its reach on a different – though equally privileged – ground.

In the latter camp it is F. R. Leavis who has most forcefully asserted the critic's right to dissociate his habits of thought from the logical checks and procedures demanded of philosophic discourse. Criticism on Leavis's terms is a matter of communicating deep-laid intuitive responses, which analysis can point to and persuasively *enact*, but which it can by no means *explain* or *theorize* about. Philosophy is kept at arm's length by treating literary language as a medium of 'lived' or 'felt' experience, a region where the critic's 'mature' responses are his only reliable guide and where there is no support to be had from abstract methodology. Hence Leavis's insistence on the virtues of 'practical' criticism (or close reading), allied to such moral imperatives as 'relevance', 'maturity' and an 'open reverence before